

## “THE BEAUTY IN HER CAGE”

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This play is dedicated to Vanesa Yael Abramovich,  
a beauty among beauties, for her talent, her generosity,  
and her constant smile. RM

### SCENE I

*(A young woman, of about 25 years of age, wearing an underskirt and nightgown, sits in front of a vanity. Everything about her posture and expression reveals concern.)*

**Felicitas:** Is it so difficult to make one understand that a woman is more than the skin covering her bones? Are the dimensions of her face, the space between her nose and mouth, the shape of her chin, or the width of her forehead of such value that they eclipse any other merit, thought, or feat of hers?

No gentleman, friend, or stranger approaches me wondering what this head of mine (*she touches her forehead*) thinks or imagines about this or that matter. Instead, they look me in the eyes with an impudence that no one questions, as if everything I am could be reduced to my eyes, mouth, or face.

When I was a little girl, I sought to be pretty, I longed to be beautiful. I was delighted when my parents expressed their fondness of me after I had been combed and dressed in my best clothes. They would point to me as the most beautiful child in the place, referring to me as Felicitas “the beautiful.” No one ever asked if I could also be Felicitas “the brave” or “the intelligent.” Sometimes I wish I were Felicitas “the rebellious” or “the unruly” or “the insubordinate” rather than to be considered only for my beauty.

I now look back and see my life unfurling as a light breeze around my face, and it is clear that because I was considered beautiful, I was not allowed to choose. Everything happened because the circumstances wrapped me up and up and led me round and round, as if no one cared about my own will.

What merit is there to being beautiful if she who possesses such beauty cannot be esteemed for her own will or deeds?

When a man approaches me, I always ask myself: “Is it for affection or desire? Or is it because he wants to take possession of my face the way he takes possession of a plot of land or a thoroughbred horse?”

I now find repulsive it that I believed so firmly in my own beauty, that whoever speaks of me does so only in reference to my beauty, especially when beauty becomes a means to obtain wealth, a social status, or any other distinction to ascend economically.

When we were little girls, my friend Albina used to ask me: “Felicitas, what is best, to be intelligent or to be beautiful?” ... “To be intelligent” – I replied one afternoon. “No, Felicitas” – she said – “intelligence troubles the soul. It is more intelligent to be beautiful because beauty brings us enjoyment, it makes young men want to spend their time with us.”

Shortly thereafter, we were playing with our cousins in the garden – “77, 78, 79, 80, ready or not, here I come...” – when they brought Don Martín de Álzaga before me. He looked at me so confidently and without blinking that he made me feel much younger than I was. I saw myself in his eyes, my face looked uneasy, almost fearful. My parents gave him an account of the diseases I had already had, of the ones I had never had, of the state of my health, of the number of children the women in my family normally had. “I had ten children and all of them are alive and healthy” – Mother added.

They stated the number of years my grandparents and great grandparents had lived, the last names on my father’s side and my mother’s, as if relating the pedigree of a stallion one buys to guarantee good and prosperous offspring.

That is how he came into my life. Mother took me aside and brought me into the room that was always in shadows, the one where she would take me when she wanted to speak to me about matters she did not want Father to hear. She spoke to me very softly and said that “God had blessed the Guerrero and Cueto family by giving them a daughter so beautiful that only the angels could have bestowed on me such a gift from the heavens,” and because of that I could now aspire to be the wife of a man of such ancestry as don Martín de Álzaga, whose last name was linked to a lineage that would be in all history books, that I was “going to enter into halls where the lamps hanging from the ceilings turn the night into day.” She added that our family of merchants who, fresh off the boat, had to wake up early for years to sell brooms and low-cost items “would never again be overlooked...” and that our last name would be recognized among the Alvears, the Azcuénagas, the Del Solars.... All last names that I understood during my childhood to be adulated or envied.

From that conversation, I can only remember the way my fingers dug and buried themselves into the handkerchief I held between my hands. I needed to hold on tightly to my handkerchief. It was like wanting to cling on to its aroma, to the scent Mother had sprayed on it that afternoon. It was like feeling a part of myself, something indivisible from me, from the house, from the games in the garden, from the family courtyard, as if I could continue to be the little girl who embroidered while Father and Mother spoke about everyday matters.

Mother continued telling me about all the benefits we would incur when I became the wife of Álzaga, that Father “was with him closing the deal in the living room, arranging the nuptial terms, the amount of the dowry...” Father had decided that my barely seventeen-year-old self should be joined through marriage to a man who was almost his own age and that that union should be indissoluble, until death do us part. But between my curious seventeen-year-old’s shameful cauldron of a womb and the death that would separate us, there would be a thousand timid, soulless deaths... “Oh Father, please do not give him my hand” –I begged him on my knees.

Mother spoke to me the same way she always did on those things she classified as feminine matters and said: “Every man is free to choose how he caresses or touches his wife; don Álzaga will mold you to his tastes and habits, he will tailor you to his needs.”

I smiled thinking that she was referring to those experiences, when my cousins and I would hide behind the hydrangea in the garden, during the long summer days, and after closing my eyes tightly, I would pout my lips to the boys’ wet and sticky lips, and my stomach would tickle, and the boys would get upset thinking that I was laughing at them. “Don’t be foolish, why are you laughing?” – “No, no, it is not a joke.”

I still remember when Albina’s cousin, several years older than me, grabbed me by the shoulders. While my eyes were closed, I felt his tongue opening my lips and brushing against mine. I ran to wash the slimy sensation from my mouth, as he left me with the sensation that a slug from the garden had slipped into it.

That afternoon Mother warned me about the importance of not expressing any kind of emotion whenever I had to be in bed with him, that he would instruct me on how and what to do, and that the only reigning will in bed would be his. She repeated this to me several times, and made me promise her that that from now on I would heed each and every word coming from Álzaga, just as I had obeyed Father’s orders, and that I should never answer him back, even if I did not agree with him, and that I should speak to him without looking him in the eyes, because under no circumstance could I make him think that I was defying him, and that Álzaga, as the older man that he was, would instruct me ... because he would take me to unimaginable places, to landscapes in faraway cities, and that I “should be thankful to life for having made me beautiful and for not having punished me like other girls we knew, to whom nature had given an ugly face, or God forbid, those girls who, having been born beautiful, had ended up with a face scarred by chicken pox or some other disease.” Yes, Mother, I should thank God in his eternal mercy for having chosen me to possess such beauty.

After that, Mother kissed my forehead and said: “Felicitas, the beautiful, you are now ready for Martín Álzaga to make you his.” In that moment, beauty fell on my shoulders as a weight that my legs could no longer bear, and I saw myself drowning in a viscous sea. I cried for several days, begging them not to hand me to that man. I lost the sense of time and reality, as if I had been comatose, and when I finally regained consciousness, I found myself in the arms of Martín Álzaga, dancing in my wedding gown, and Father was asking his permission to dance with me to that waltz that sounded so mournful, and in one of those turns I saw several of the young men who had been my friends looking at me as a loved and desired object that was now drifting away, beyond reach and forbidden.

I had now become Lady Felicitas Guerrero de Álzaga, a beautiful and unapproachable doll, a beautiful face with no free will.

Martín Álzaga took me in his arms and brought me into a room. The servants who were scenting the air, burning flower petals, left promptly, and I entered into uncharted territory, where don Álzaga became lord and master of my will, and I, barely a child, would play at being a woman, one who should submit to everything he required. He looked at me in the eyes like no one else

had before. His eyes ran over me from head to toe while he took off his coat, his bowtie. I barely managed to lie down, without removing my wedding gown, and to cover myself with the sheet up to the neck.

I had begged Father, kneeling before him, asked him not to agree to that union. I dreaded feeling the wrinkled skin of the man who was to become my husband, scrapping like sand against mine. I cried imagining the white hair on his chest, which had lost the firmness and smoothness of youth.

He grabbed me with his huge hand by the nape, put me down on the bed and pulled the sheet away, leaving me completely exposed. I thought of grabbing it, but his gaze stopped me. I could not disobey him, I could not make any gesture, Mother had instructed me.

Without a word, he stepped away from me and slowly proceeded to take off each one of his boots and socks. With great parsimony, he undid the buttons on his pants one by one. That is when I understood that all I could do was to wait for him, while I looked at the ceiling, exposed under his eyes, until he decided to move close to me.

He sat me on the bed and yanked off my wedding gown as well as my shoes, which, in the haste to cover myself, I had left on. He removed my underskirt with the greatest impudence and left me naked before him.

“¡You are indeed beautiful!” – he said. With a grave manner, he looked at me for a few interminable seconds, as if wanting to hoard the sight of my naked body with all his greed. And without any love or caress, he jumped on me as if I were a mare. He squeezed my thighs with his and began to jerk back and forth without looking at me. It felt as if he were ripping away my happiness with agitated prances, and I only hoped “I could bleed into the sheets, for there to be a blood stain on the sheets, for the sheets to be stained with my blood, even if only minimally,” as Mother had ordered me to do, because I could not afford to offend Don Martín, who now presided over my life, and Father had guaranteed him that his sheets would bear the sign of my shattered innocence.

I had always respected the word of my Father, but Martín’s absolute. From now on, Martín Alzaga, my husband and the first man in my life, would rule over me.

I was absorbed by those thoughts when a sharp pain made me grab on to his back. I noticed the strength of the back of a man who had lived a long life, it was a back that did not resemble the soft backs I had touched while playing with my cousins.

He gave out a loud gasp, a sort of snort against my shoulder, and he let his head fall against my clavicle, moaning and letting out air several times, while his forehead seemed to dig a hole into chest.

Once he became motionless, I asked if there was something wrong. He passed his hand over my chest and caressed my face. He traced the lines of my lips with his fingers, made a small ringlet with a lock of my hair on his index finger, and said: “You are beautiful, child.”

Without looking at me, he left me on the bed. He got dressed and left the room giving orders. I heard the hasty steps of the servants running to get the *mate* ready and at the temperature that Don Martín always demanded.

I curled into my shame. My body had been groped. I had been ravaged without consent and felt dirty with someone else's smell. Is that love? If this is love, love is a gloomy territory without happiness.

I would have liked to see Mother in our carriage coming to take me out of there, but I could only find threatening shadows in the room. I covered myself with the sheets. They felt warm and soft on my denigrated skin.

The door burst open, and Mother came in. At first, I thought it was a dream, something one desperately wishes would happen, and I thought she was coming to my rescue, but none of it happened like I hoped. Mother entered the room with a smile so detached from my needs; Martín came in behind her.

Mother wrapped me in the sheet and took me out of the bed. Underneath my feet, I felt the creases of my wedding gown, thrown onto the floor without any modesty. I was thinking that it would wrinkle forever, when suddenly, Mother pointed to the sheet on the bed with pride.

There was that blood stain I deemed so impure. "I told you Don Martín" – Mother emphasized – "the child was pure, you made her a woman."

He looked at me as one looks at his property and made a small gesture with his head, as if approving of the moment of shared intimacy. He turned on his heels and left while Mother chased him down the hall clamoring "he has taken a treasure, the most beautiful woman in the city."

And the weight of beauty bore down on my shoulders once more. I was curled up, wrapped in that sheet that was not mine, that did not have my scent but that of Don Martín Álzaga, and I cried. I cried until a black woman with her head wrapped in a scarf with polka dots embraced me and helped me to stand up, and said: "Lady Felicitas, the bath is ready with warm water, and we all await your orders to organize the house. That is what master Álzaga has ordered."

"Wait for *me* to organize the house?" – I said, frightened to see my childhood slipping away through the door. "That is what Don Martín ordered" – said a man who was wearing a hat and who was looking from a few meters away – "He said you would tell us how everything should be from now on."

I knew that every moment inside the room would be without happiness, that I would be subdued to Don Martín, my master. But outside of it, I could create a house full of colors and scents, of smiles and invitations, and of reasons for joy, because under his rule as master of the house was mine as the wife of Álzaga, and for the first time in my life I savored the joy of those things that are exchanged for others. Being with him in bed for a while according to his fancy granted me

the power over an army of servants and errand boys ready to bump into each other in the halls as soon as I gave an order. They would beg for the instant in which I would drop something on the floor to rush to pick it up and hand it to me without looking me in the eyes, with a knee on the ground before me because I was the Lady of the house. And what the Lady of the house says is an order.

I was Lady Felicitas Guerrero, and the taste of power made my nipples harden, and I smiled.

Even then, every now and then, in the afternoons, I was overcome by the ennui I had observed in that bird of lively colors that Don Martín Álzaga contemplated for hours while drinking *mate*. One day, I said: “Don Martín, why don’t you let it go? I notice it is very sad. Don’t you see it doesn’t sing?” He looked at me with scorn towards my comment, as if I were nothing and answered, owing more to manners than interest: “I don’t have it so that it can sing, Felicia, I want to look at his exotic plumage, at his lively colors shining in front of the afternoon sun. Common birds are for singing, those goldfinches that are part of the landscape and that you can find anytime you take but a few steps into the garden and which I don’t have need for in my gallery. You don’t understand, Felicia, birds of beautiful plumage are like a painting of great quality. What matters is that you possess it, that you reserve its beauty for yourself.” I said: “But if it could choose, it would fly away the moment you opened the door.” He interrupted me, almost shouting: “Possessions don’t choose, they belong to you. If I give it food and water and I clean its cage every day, it should be thankful to me. It is a bird, and it doesn’t have to understand, but you child, you must understand that that bird that graces my gallery owes me a thank-you. He will not fly, it is true, but under my protection he suffers no risk.” And he turned his back on me and left.

For a moment the bird and I looked at each other, without a sound, as if the entire world had decided to remain in silence. I was not able to stand his sorrowful eyes, which reminded me of the reflection of my eyes in the mirror. He stayed alone in his cage. I left to give orders to the servants.

I was able to command an army of servants, but why I could not command myself to be happy?

“Don’t be a silly child, Felicitas” – I told myself – “Don Martín only wants a few minutes with you in bed when he feels like it.” As Mother said, “You can always hide your sadness.” It will only be a few moments of looking at the ceiling and they will go by fast. He will want children from you.” “Children of good blood” – as he said – “good progeny from such a stallion and from a beautiful woman.”

And if it all was supposed to be this way, then what was the reason for my sadness? Why was I sad when I should be happy?

## SCENE II

*(Albina enters. She’s a young woman, similar in age to Felicitas.)*

**Albina:** What is wrong, Felicitas? How come you are in this state? You seem to be talking to yourself.

**Felicitas:** Memories... a parade of memories that appear at the most inopportune moment, that refuse to leave no matter much I try to make them.

**Albina:** But today is not a day for such memories. Today is a day for celebration, you must be happy, come on, let the afternoon sun shine in, let the warm January air come in. Smile!

**Felicitas:** Oh, Albina! My beautiful friend, a time of happiness would suit me well.

**Albina:** Samuel Sáenz Valiente is so in love with you that he will bring a joyous air into your life. He is so happy, so beaming, and when he smiles his dimples give him a boyish charm, and yet he is so prepared, so determined in the management of his affairs.

**Felicitas:** Albina!

**Albina:** He is so manly and has a youthful air at the same time. Not even in those moments of the greatest seriousness does he appear serious... that is what I was referring to. I swear that if you hadn't lured him first, I would have approached him and spoken things into to his ear that I would not dare to confess.

**Felicitas:** Albina!

**Albina:** Let's go Felicitas, get ready. The guests are arriving, and this must be the most dazzling party since those of the tyrant Juan Manuel. It has been 20 years since then... All of Buenos Aires will talk about your engagement. They say that even President Sarmiento wants to attend, and Don Bartolomé Mitre will do so too, despite the rivalry between them.

**Felicitas:** How is the president going to attend...

**Albina:** How not? You yourself said that Don Sarmiento made you uncomfortable in the manner that he looked at your cleavage so wantonly and stared into your eyes without blinking as if he wanted to plunge into them.

**Felicitas:** (*Cunningly*) I noticed the way Don Bartolomé wouldn't stop looking at your ankles.

**Albina:** (*Blushing, changes the topic*) The announcement of your engagement will be a success, everyone will talk about it for years to come... The most luxurious carriages are arriving, there is almost no place to park them close to the gate of the garden. The musicians have already arrived and there are children running through the park and playing... You will be the queen, you will dance the waltz with Samuel and there will be no young man in all of Buenos Aires who won't want to dance with you for just a moment before you become Samuel's fiancée. And the sky will open wider with your every turn. (*Albina pretends to dance while she hums.*)

**Felicitas:** Oh, Albina! You and your wild imagination...

**Albina:** There it is! Listen! It's the musicians that have started to play their set. (*A waltz can be heard in the distance. Albina, grotesquely playing the role of a man, asks her to dance.*) Do you remember when we used to play the suitors' game in the garden... "Lady Felicitas, would you grant me this waltz?"

**Felicitas:** (*With mock exaggeration*) I only dance with gentlemen my dear...

**Albina:** Yes, that is what I am, a man... My estancia is yours. (*They laugh.*) My name is Samuel Sáenz Valiente and I come to claim your hand.

**Felicitas:** (*Playfully*) I don't know if I should...

**Albina:** Come now, Lady Felicitas Guerrero, if you're dying to dance with me, of course you should. (*Felicitas takes Albina's hand and they dance moving to the rhythm of the waltz, laughing.*)

**Felicitas:** When we get married, I will have a bed covered with petals to welcome your beauty, so your back does not touch the cold sheets.

**Albina:** Have you noticed, Samuel, that I sent for this dress from Paris for you and only for you?

**Felicitas:** Beautiful dress, what I like the most are the few seconds that it will take for me to take it off... (*They stop dancing, and they laugh.*)

**Albina:** Oh, Felicitas! Your happiness is my happiness. A few moments ago we were young girls playing. You know how happy it makes me to see you smile after such a long time in which your sadness had settled on your face, there were moments when I thought that it was shattering your soul. (*Felicitas laughs.*)

**Felicitas:** I am happy, Albina! It sounds strange coming from my mouth, but I am happy.

**Albina:** Sing it! Yell it! Go to the garden and run among the guests and say it aloud, Felicitas, tell everyone: "My mourning time is over, I am happy!"

**Felicitas:** You know very well I cannot do that. Today is the first day that I stopped mourning for Don Martín. People are going about, murmuring that it has only been two months since he left us.

**Albina:** I did not tell this for you to get sad again... Please, nothing can tarnish this day.

**Felicitas:** I know it... how do I look?

**Albina:** Beautiful... How else can Felicitas the beautiful look? What other word can be used to describe you? But ready yourself, for the most important families of Buenos Aires are arriving. As you know, they make every preparation to arrive last.

**Felicitas:** Is Samuel here already?

**Albina:** Not yet... Who do you take me for? Had he arrived, wouldn't I have come running to you, shouting the news at the top of my lungs? I asked your brother Juancito to stay alert and to tell me as soon as he arrives.

**Felicitas:** And Juancito listened to you?

**Albina:** I promised him that I would speak well of him to the daughter of the Pueyrredón...

**Felicitas:** *(She laughs)* It is just that...

**Albina:** Oh, I almost forgot. Someone who did arrive a little while ago and is waiting out there to talk to you is Enrique Ocampo Reguera.

**Felicitas:** Enrique Ocampo... But what does he want?

**Albina:** You know exactly what he wants... I noticed him full of drink and rage, he is now talking to your tía Tránsito. She is trying to convince him to come back another day, but he refuses, he says that he will not leave until he speaks to you...

**Felicitas:** But I spoke with him a few days ago. He came to ruin the party.

**Albina:** Nothing can ruin your party and the announcement of your engagement. Don't worry about Ocampo, I will speak to him myself and ask him to be understanding and leave.

**Felicitas:** Please tell him to not ruin the esteem I have had for him since we were young, practically children.

**Albina:** Just worry about primping and being prepared, as all of Buenos Aires has come to express its admiration and love for you. I will be back in a few moments. *(Albina leaves.)*

### SCENE III

*(Felicitas continues primping. She slips into her dress, puts on perfume, and preens in front of the mirror. Every now and then she walks around the bedroom, governed by the intensity of her emotions.)*

**Felicitas:** Can it be so difficult to tell esteem and affection from passion and love? Enrique Ocampo had always been so attentive. I was almost a child when I met him. He said he was in love with me, but I always took it as a game. Back then, had Father not made the arrangement with Álzaga, perhaps I would have considered Enrique, but so much has happened in just a few years; it all seems so far away now.

The day I married Don Martín Álzaga, as I was walking by the nave of the church arm in arm with him, I noticed the hollow eyes of Enrique Ocampo among the greetings and blessings of the guests. He was looking at me as if I were a dream lost. For some time, his smile, the one he showed when we used to play in the garden, had vanished from his face; his laughter, which sounded like a waterfall, had ceased. He appeared to me as the saddest man I had ever known.

I did not see him again for as long as my marriage lasted. He avoided running into us at every social event; he refused to accept that I was married to a man thirty years my senior. Every now and then, my brothers would tell me that he asked about me with great caution and restraint, but every time I tried to recall Enrique's laughter during the afternoon games in the garden, all I was able to see was his desolate face at the church.

When Don Martín passed away, I was still grieving our beloved son, Félix Francisco Solano Álzaga. He was barely three years old, and his teeth were still a pearly-white. I would chase him everywhere, feeling more like an older sister than the mother who had brought him into the world. My beloved child, may his soul rest in peace, was my only bridge to happiness. But yellow fever came into my house without knocking at the door.

Don Martín used to say: "Yellow fever is a disease of Blacks; it will never win against the good blood of our lineage." But one afternoon, without announcing itself, yellow fever came in through the door as if it were an icy wind and took my son from my arms. With all my might, I held my child, who was slipping away. He was shivering with cold; his entire body was drenched in sweat. He was looking at me as if pleading for me to explain why his body burned when it had never been in pain before. I tried to embrace him with my body and love, but the doctors pulled me away and took me to a room where the servants were burning sulfur. They threw all his clothes into the fire, following public health orders.

Martín said that Félix had been so good that God, in his eternal mercy, needed him close, and that was the reason he had taken him at such an early age. They did not allow me to follow him to the cemetery. I found out a special casket had been made for him. I cut a pair of fabric wings for my little angel, but when I went to slip them on him, he was gone... He must have been taken on a wagon like everyone else, mixed in with servants and masters. Death, in all its cruelty, did not wish to grant any privileges to my beloved son. He was one more being on the pestilent ride along Moridero street and to the mass grave, where the swollen bodies of the dead were thrown and covered by shovelfuls of quicklime.

After church, I would visit the family grave, where I brought flowers every Sunday. My mourning was not yet over when Don Martín Álzaga declared its irrelevance. He said that I was young and a good child-bearer and that we would bring an even more beautiful child into the world. I was unable to say no. There was such firmness in his words that I was unable to shout at him that for a mother a child can neither be traded nor replaced with another, as one does with a horse during a journey.

I would have liked to insult him but there was already a new life growing inside my womb. It was in the midst of my birth pangs that Don Martín also left this world shivering. He left me a widow at age twenty-four and with a newborn child. I named him Martín de Álzaga Guerrero.

His first cry stirred up the house while Martín's body was still warm. But that child was not able to see one day turn into the next. He left with God and his infinite glory the very same day he came into the world. He died right in my arms, which were unable to hold onto him. I watched him die like a dream slipping away through my fingers.

The doctors took him away and ordered me to bathe in bromide since there was no doubt that both father and child had clear symptoms of yellow fever. I did not ask where they took them. I did not want to imagine the child's defenseless body under the light of the moon, with a shovelful of quicklime on his face and surrounded by bodies which had been degraded by the stench of death.

I thought I had no choice but to die with them, to go down Moridero street, enter the grave, and throw quicklime on my face, for its beauty had brought me such misfortunes. Why did the God whom I implored so much not understand that if he brought my children back to life, I would tear off the skin on my face? I would proudly confront the world and expose my bleeding flesh in a diabolical delirium for all to be frightened by the most extreme ugliness ever conceived... I would do anything. I would use my nails to open the earthen bed where those voracious and ungodly worms devour and gnaw away my children's smiles... But my little angels cannot return, God refused to bring them back to me... Dress in black, close all windows, blinds, and lattices, not even let the slightest sunbeam in! I did everything to keep the light away from my face, to keep even a single ray from touching it... God forgive me for saying this, but in the midst of that darkness, of that sadness, I saw the image of my remaining youth. I sought to recover the Felicitas who had just seen Martín for the first time, as if it were possible to stop the wheel of fortune and recover lost time.

I shed genuine tears for my children, my flesh and blood and on whom darkness fell before they could see the light of day. But deep inside of me, I enjoyed not having to breathe the smell of dry skin or to be mounted like a mare on the days His Lord and Master desired, for in his desire I died.

I dressed in black and hid my face behind a veil, which made it impossible for men's gazes to fall upon me. I left the house only to attend mass, as Mother had taught me, and then cloistered myself to recite the novenas for the soul of my beloved children.

One afternoon, my beautiful friend Albina reproached me: "You are twenty-four years old Felicitas, you cannot do this to yourself; you have no right to vanish like the dead with every passing day. Cast off your mourning dress and let the wind touch your skin."

My skin? The soft skin, shoulders, and neck of a woman. (*She touches her arms and shoulders.*) The mirror reflected back at me the image of a young face, of smooth, immaculate hands. (*She begins to remove some of her clothes.*) But I am young; my skin is smooth and soft, free of marks from his old skin chafing on mine as he rocked back and forth on top of me.... What a perverse command! What wicked destiny drives me to bury myself in the coffin of a man I did not love? I would pull out the nails on my children's coffins, unearth them from that putrefying grave and wait for death next to their bones still covered by decaying flesh.... But what to do with this fire, with this tremor that emerges from my womb like a volcano? What to do with this unstoppable

yearning for the touch of a man? Why does the longing for a pleasure I have not yet lived weigh so much on me?

Mother, did you not want wealth? I have given it to you. Father, did you not want a last name that would turn our family name into one of distinction? I have attained that for you. Did you not want land? Now, vast estancias which extend as far as the eye can see are mine and therefore yours. But don't you understand that money cannot satiate my thirst, that my lips are dry for love? I need the taste of a man.

I have been for you and because of you the Felicitas that accepted your commands. But Mother, I cannot continue to be the sad widow of Álzaga, ready to kneel at the confessional. I want to be, once again, the Felicitas that ran through the garden with her arms open and her hair flowing, the one who did not hide her face from the sun. I want to live, Father. I am a young woman. My breasts are swollen and my womb is firm; my soul has regained its purity so that I can now turn into the arms of Samuel, whom I have chosen.

*(A murmur is heard, as if a group of people were speaking behind someone's back.)* Is it important that it has only been two months since the death of my husband...? I shed all the necessary tears for my children. I shed many more tears for Don Álzaga during his lifetime. I cried every night, every evening, every time he touched me. You yourself, father, in order to soothe my pain, sent me to rest at the estancia, the one Martín left me on his will, the one you coveted so much. It was on the way to the estancia that in the midst of a downpour, the coachman lost his way, and we began to pass through hollows and groves that I had never seen before. Without expecting it, Samuel appeared, mounted on his horse, like an angel coming out of the rain, like the sun emerging in a windstorm. He introduced himself and said: "Welcome! My estancia is your estancia..."

And from that very moment, I knew that the man for whom I had long awaited had finally come into my life.

Martín was the master who ruled, who possessed me without permission or consent, while I felt helpless before his needs and desires. Samuel was the love I had dreamed about. He was the man I had wished would ask for my consent with his love and tenderness so that my body could open like a cocoon, liberating the desire that I was never able to unleash.

If Martín represented authority and severity, Samuel became the warmest smile.

I had never been treated with such gallantry. I felt protected. To dry my mourning clothes, Samuel lent me his sisters' clothing. "I don't have black attire" – he said –, and the colors of the clothes made me feel alive once again. The reds and greens restored the color to my face. I felt warmed by his gaze. He looked and smiled at me with deference, contrary to the way other men had always looked at me before: as a soulless porcelain doll. The firewood was ablaze, and in its glow, his pale eyes filled mine. I was enveloped by a passion free from greed.

"Samuel, you introduced me to love!"

## SCENE IV

*(Albina enters.)*

**Albina:** Felicitas, I cannot make Enrique Ocampo come to his senses. Your aunt Tránsito and even one of your brothers have spoken to him. I, too, have asked him to understand what you feel for Samuel.

**Felicitas:** I was very clear when I spoke to him a few days ago. I assured him I had doubts and that it was my wish to be engaged to the man I love.

**Albina:** He demands to speak to you again.

**Felicitas:** My engagement is today. Enrique has no right to make any demands of me. I fear that if Samuel arrives, they might end up crossing each other in a duel.

**Albina:** Samuel has already arrived. I didn't mention anything to avoid worrying you. Your brothers took him to the garden to greet the guests.

**Felicitas:** Samuel already knows that Enrique and I spoke.

**Albina:** I doubt he would lend himself to such a scandal. He is very happy about the public announcement you are going to make tonight.

**Felicitas:** That is precisely why I cannot allow Enrique or anybody else cloud my joy tonight.

**Albina:** I believe the best thing you can do is to confront him and ask him to leave. He argues that you encouraged him after Alzaga's death, that you led him on, that you raised hopes. You know he has been in love with you since you were both children. Opening the doors of your home in the afternoons and allowing him to accompany you in your mourning confused him.

**Felicitas:** Mother was always present when he visited.

**Albina:** Felicitas, you know that I am your friend and that I will always be on your side, but you knew what he felt for you; his visits were not innocent.

**Felicitas:** I took them as the visits of a friend who came to offer his company in my time of grief.

**Albina:** Deep inside, you were aware of his intentions, we were all aware of them. I don't think you are aware of what your presence generates. Your beauty makes everything else invisible, look at me, look at me... Who am I?... Who am I?... You are Felicitas the beautiful but for everyone else, I am Albina, the one who walks next to the beauty. The one who must be tolerated as the third party in a date for two.

**Felicitas:** Are rebuking me?

**Albina:** It is not a rebuke. I only want you to realize that you are not the only person inhabiting this world. I am here, too. We are the same age, we had the same childhood friends, including Enrique. I have known him for as long as you have. Here I am, ready to be your lady-in-company, but I will never be the woman who occupies center stage. I have already accepted that that place is yours. Enrique Ocampo is a handsome man; he is willful and talented. He is so graceful that any woman would die to be with him. But he made a mistake with you. Wrongfully and without pride, he came and served as a tapestry for your footsteps.

**Felicitas:** If that is how you feel, go out and tell him that you want to be with him.

**Albina:** You are humiliating me, Felicitas. You know very well that he only has eyes for you.

**Felicitas:** Are you envious of me?

**Albina:** It is not envy, but I do want you to understand that whether you like it or not, the rest of us also have feelings. If I envied you, I wouldn't be here with you. I know that as long as you are present, no man is going to look at me.

**Felicitas:** But Albina, look how beautiful you are, look what beautiful hands you have.

**Albina:** You do not need to console me. You radiate a light of your own, and I will always live in your shadow. *(She speaks while she cries.)* But I don't envy you. I love you, Felicitas. We have been friends from time immemorial. But you might not have noticed what happens to me, just as you might not have noticed what you were causing by allowing Enrique to visit you. You were hurting him...

**Felicitas:** He offered me his friendship, and I accepted it...

**Albina:** No man comes to you only for friendship, and you know it. I believe Enrique understood his overtures to be without limit.

**Felicitas:** *(She speaks very firmly, as if annoyed by Albina.)* You are wrong. There was a limit and I made it very clear to him. It was quite clear I did not invite him to this gathering. I didn't ask him to come. I don't care if he leaves now.

**Albina:** You are doing the same to me. You want me to leave after what I just said you. *(She is about to leave; Felicitas holds her back.)*

**Felicitas:** No Albina, you are different. I will speak to Samuel so that we can find a friend of his from a good family for such a beautiful person as you. *(She hugs her.)* It would hurt my soul if you were to leave on such an important day for me. Whether I am single or married, I need to know that you are close to me. You are my friend, and your friendship was the only affection that saw me through my misfortunes.

**Albina:** Felicitas, I am sorry for what I said. *(They hug each other.)*

**Felicitas:** Now, we must continue with the celebration. Where is Enrique?

**Albina:** He is waiting in the gallery. But I must warn you, he confessed to me that on his way here, he had stopped at the Confitería del Gas, where he had a few drinks to help him summon the courage to tell you what he came to say. He is out of his mind; he is not reasoning.

**Felicitas:** He will have to have to come to his senses. Today can only be a day of pure celebration for me. Perhaps you are right, and I raised his expectations, which were unrequited by me. But why should I think about what everyone else feels and not be true to what is in my heart?

**Albina:** Do you realize that what you are about to announce will define your life? Rejecting a man like Enrique and announcing to everyone that your heart belongs to Samuel is not a game... Are you sure you have no doubts? The deaths of your son and husband are so recent...

**Felicitas:** This is the first time I choose, Albina. Everyone else has always chosen for me. Father came to me saying, "Martín will be your husband." Martín used to tell me when to wake up, when to go to bed, when and where to go. My only home was his house, and I was the one who organized it and gave the orders to the servants, but he ruled over me. He dictated to me what to wear, what not to wear, when to speak and when I should keep quiet.

Do you not think that I deserve an opportunity to do what my soul is urging me to do? Even you Albina, do you not understand me? I am tired of being Felicitas the beautiful (*she cries*), which is akin to saying the stupid one, the incapable one, the face without a mind, the one who has no wits. I have my own freewill, Albina. What tragic star rules over me that I should be yoked to misfortune? I curse having been born beautiful; I curse this face that the mirror returns to me. (*She covers her image on the mirror.*)

**Albina:** (*She holds Felicitas.*) You are very beautiful, Felicitas, outside and even more so inside.

**Felicitas:** Beauty has been a curse.

**Albina:** Your beauty cannot be a curse. It is a gift that God has granted you. Please forgive me, my dear friend. Please forgive me for having doubted you.

**Felicitas:** (*She recovers her strength.*) I have no doubts whatsoever. I love Samuel, I have loved him since the first day I saw him. I love the way he listens to me, consults me, asks about my opinions and my likings. I love that youthful smile that makes me feel young again. His smile makes me forget the smell of altar candles and embraces me with the fragrance of fresh flowers, like life giving birth to life. He turned what was wilted into something fresh. He turned my tears into a smile I cannot contain.

**Albina:** Very well my friend, let me help you. Today you are going to be more beautiful than ever. No one with any sense will forget how beautiful and radiant you will be before everyone. The sun will envy you, my beautiful Felicitas. Let's dry those tears. Let no one know tears were shed in this room.

**Felicitas:** Do you think this bow on my hair suits me well?

**Albina:** Everything looks beautiful on you. Raise that head of yours and face the world. Try to convey your love to everyone with your smile, without shadows or gloom.

**Felicitas:** I see myself in his arms, my head resting on his youthful chest and his hand stroking my hair. I see the afternoon light soft and calm, filtering through the lace curtains, reflecting the sky in his eyes, those eyes of his that look at me with love rather than lust.

**Albina:** Let's go Felicitas, the clock is ticking.

**Felicitas:** Time must ring its bells for my marriage.

**Albina:** Let's go, the guests are waiting. (*Felicitas finishes getting dressed; she shows herself to Albina.*)

**Felicitas:** Do I look okay?

**Albina:** One cannot be more beautiful.

**Felicitas:** Where did you say Enrique was waiting for me?

**Albina:** He is waiting for you inside the house, almost right next to the entrance of this very door.

**Felicitas:** And the guests?

**Albina:** They are waiting in the garden. We are the only ones inside the house and maybe a servant in the kitchen.

**Felicitas:** Would you come with me to speak to Enrique?

**Albina:** Are you afraid of him?

**Felicitas:** A bit.

**Albina:** He will not agree to speak in front of me. He insisted that he wanted to see you alone. But don't worry, your aunt Tránsito is on watch, and I've asked your brother Antonio and your cousin Cristian to secretly keep an eye on him and to listen through the garden window in case he says anything out of turn and they need to protect you.

**Felicitas:** You know something, Albina, I no longer care what he says. I am sure of myself.

**Albina:** Your happiness is my happiness.

**Felicitas:** Very well, I will tidy things up and go.

**Albina:** Please, don't worry. Go and show your happiness to everyone. Live this moment without worrying about anything else. I will take care of everything here and I will catch up with the celebration in a moment.

**Felicitas:** Thank you, Albina. You are such a good friend. *(They hug each other.)*

**Albina:** Go on dear. We look like two old women crying. *(Felicitas walks towards the door. Before leaving, she turns around and looks at Albina.)*

**Albina:** Courage, Felicitas!

**Felicitas:** *(She smiles.)* I love you... *(She opens the door and speaks towards the exterior.)*  
¡Hello Enrique!... *(Felicitas leaves.)* *(Albina stays inside putting away the clothes and the perfumes. She is interrupted by the shouts of a man and various bangs on the door.)*

**Voices off-stage:** *(Shouts are heard from off-stage.)* Are you marrying me or Samuel?

**Felicitas:** *(Off-stage)* My heart belongs to Samuel... *(Albina stops what she is doing and goes towards the door. Felicitas comes in. A shout is heard on the exterior.)*

**Voices off-stage:** If you are not mine, you will belong to no one. *(A shot is heard.)* *(Felicitas comes in trying to hold on to the door; she collapses. Albina bends down to embrace her amidst cries of pain.)*

**Felicitas:** *(In extremis.)* They did not let me choose Albina... They did not let me!...

**Voices off-stage:** Murderer! Ocampo, you killed her! You have killed the most beautiful woman of all! *(Two more shouts can be heard on the exterior. Albina hugs Felicitas with all her might.)*

**Voices off-stage:** *(A woman cries.)* Ocampo is dead!... He paid for passion with his life...

**Albina:** *(She cries and hugs Felicitas with a maternal and loving gesture.)* Felicitas don't leave me... I love you, I always loved you? ... Don't go... Let me be your chaperone... without your beauty, my life no longer makes sense... I want to be the third party on a date for two... Let me, Felicitas... Let me!

**Voice of a town crier:** *(Off-stage)* Neighbor, neighbor... Felicitas Guerrero de Álzaga has been killed. The most beautiful woman of the city has been killed... Felicitas died and the sky cries... *(The voice mixes with Albina's cries. The light begins to fade away slowly.)*

***(Final blackout)***

*Cabrera, between Salguero and Bulnes, January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015.*